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### Citation for published version:

Ecks, S 2009, 'Welcome Home, Descartes! Rethinking the Anthropology of the Body', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, vol. 52, no. 1, pp. 153-158. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.0.0075>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1353/pbm.0.0075](https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.0.0075)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### Published In:

Perspectives in Biology and Medicine

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## WELCOME HOME, DESCARTES!

### *rethinking the anthropology of the body\**

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STEFAN ECKS

**ABSTRACT** For many scholars, the Cartesian mind/body split is one of the fundamental mistakes of the Western scientific tradition. Anthropologists who study notions of the body in cultures around the world regularly take Descartes as their point of departure. Many also suggest that breaking free from Descartes is politically liberating: if the mindful body could be rediscovered, society could move away from its materialist, positivist, and commodity-fetishizing ways. *Beyond the Body Proper* is anthropology's best and most comprehensive anti-Cartesian manifesto to date. This volume brings together some of the finest studies on the cultural and historical diversity of bodies and minds. Yet anthropologists' blanket rejection of the mind/body dualism seems politically self-defeating. If anthropologists want to criticize racism, gender hierarchies, or discrimination against disabled people, they need to believe that the mind is independent from the body. In other words, they need to uphold the Cartesian split.

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE WINTER MORNINGS that made his thoughts freeze like water. All his life he used to stay in bed until it was nearly noon, but the Swedish queen had asked him to rise daily before five o'clock to give her philosophy lessons. The cold air pierced his lungs. He felt weak and tired. Eleven days later, pneumonia brought him to an early death.

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\*Margaret Lock and Judith Farquhar, eds. *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2007. Pp. 688. \$34.95 (paper).

*Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, volume 52, number 1 (winter 2009):153–58

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He liked to think, and to think systematically. In a discourse on the method of conducting one's reason well, he wanted to show that God must exist because God was a logical necessity. A person's conduct in life also had to follow clear principles. One of the rules he set for himself was not to rebel against outer conditions that could not be changed. If one does not like the world as it is, it is better to alter one's attitude toward it. Do not ask for the impossible, and you will lead a happy life. If you can accept your fate of never "possessing the kingdoms of China or Mexico," then you can also accept being sick and mortal: "we should no more desire health in disease, or freedom in imprisonment, than we now desire bodies incorruptible as diamonds, or wings of birds to fly with." The key to happiness is the realization that, even if nothing is in one's power, not even one's body, the thoughts of the mind are inalienable. "I think, I am" was his mind's Declaration of Independence from the world of preconceived ideas (Descartes 1637).

Those who shifted his bones around for centuries later must have thought that a bit of his soul was still present in them. His body was first buried in a graveyard in Stockholm. Later his remains were taken to a church in Paris. Then the French revolutionaries put what was left into a new tomb in the Panthéon. His body did not stay whole throughout this journey. Parts of it became scattered relics. His skull wound up in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, one of the world's great anthropology museums.

But anthropologists get upset every time someone mentions his name. René Descartes? Did he not say that the body and the mind are completely separate? That the body is nothing but a machine that can be dissected and its parts sold off to the highest bidder? That objective science must dominate subjective feelings? Any idea that seems to rest on a dichotomy between mind and body is blamed on Descartes and staunchly rejected. The "body proper" is one of these.

*Beyond the Body Proper*, edited by anthropologists Margaret Lock and Judith Farquhar, is a wonderful collection of ethnographic, philosophical, and historical writings on the body. It presents around 50 articles in nine thematic groups (e.g., gender, colonialism, capitalism). It starts with a selection of founding texts and ends with essays on contemporary biotechnology. Each group brings together diverse perspectives. For example, Part 3 deals with basic bodily processes and how they can be "denaturalized." It begins with Evans-Pritchard's ethnography of Nuer time reckoning, passes through Bynum's history of women mystics in medieval Europe, and ends with Tsing's postmodern take on how Dayaks in Kalimantan and U.S. antiabortionists conceptualize embryos.

Lock and Farquhar had an excellent hand in selecting these essays. *Beyond the Body Proper* makes an ideal companion for undergraduate courses, but it also contains surprises for those who know the field. As always with such collections, a few of the inclusions are as debatable as some of the omissions. For example, Norbert Elias's (1939) historical sociology of the body is not included. If the focus is on alternative body concepts, an excerpt on Hindu "dividuals" by

McKim Marriott (1989) would have been a straightforward choice. Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) would have deserved a whole chapter, not least because he was such an inspiration for Michel Foucault. Martin Heidegger's essay on the "Time of the World Picture" (1938) remains one of the most astounding discussions of Cartesian dualism and would have made a great addition to the volume.

Despite the broad sweep of topics and approaches, Lock and Farquhar try to identify where they converge. Because that point is so difficult to locate, they start with its opposite, their point of departure: the "body proper." The editors define the body proper as the individualized organism that science and regimes of power have turned into an object of inquiry. The body proper is a clearly delineated entity that can be held responsible in courts of law. It can be cut open and investigated. It can be trained and normalized. It is the basic block from which society is built. The body proper squeezes diverse ways of being into a "skin-bounded, rights-bearing, communicating, experience-collecting, biomechanical entity" (p. 2).

The body needs to be kept stable in order to find "invariant symptoms of illness, rational self-interest, the priority of the economic in the structuring of motives" (p. 3). The stability of the body is seen as a ploy of power to discipline and normalize. To claim, for example, that differences between men and women are scientific facts might legitimate gender hierarchies (p. 21). Not all social scientists have been sufficiently critical of, and many were complicit with, medicine in projects ranging from eugenics, racial discrimination, and capitalist exploitation of consumer-patients: "arguably social science continued to collaborate with biomedicine to smuggle normative concerns with race, intelligence, and beauty into policy [and] clinical practice" (p. 5). Therefore, to show that the body oozes out of its boundaries and escapes classification seems like an inherently liberating practice. Marxist theory is the mainstay of many articles in this collection, and a departure from the "bourgeois metropolitan world" (p. 187) is the goal.

The volume is subtitled "Reading the Anthropology of Material Life," and an engagement with materiality is another side of the reflection on the body proper. Lock and Farquhar point out that social scientists should not be complacent about staying on "the culture side of the nature-culture divide" (p. 11). All dichotomies are bad, including those that privilege cultural understandings over natural explanations. To say, for example, that medical science "constructs" the body as proper and to reveal the historical contingency of this body is not enough. With new conceptual approaches, such as actor-network theory, the outlines of a reinvigorated materialism are becoming visible, a materialism that is "neither reductive and economistic nor sealed off from the traditional humanistic concerns of signification, subjectivity, and ethics" (p. 12).

Lock and Farquhar retrace the origins of the body proper to the late 16th century. In that age, the body split in two: the body's "earthiness, sensuality, and inspiration for aesthetic and religious expression" was separated from "the body

proper, the object body that became a subject for systematic investigation by the natural sciences" (p. 19). One of the chief culprits for this was Descartes. His mind-body dualism made the body "fully machinelike" (p. 19). The body's bifurcation at the beginning of modernity has left such a deep scar that "perhaps no writing in modern Western languages can entirely escape the persistent dualism of body and mind" (p. 111). But as difficult as it might be to move beyond Descartes, it is the task of anthropology and of all "serious thinking about collective, material human life" (p. 111) to overcome it.

Indeed, there are few signs that Descartes is going away easily. Ian Hacking (2006), a philosopher and historian of science, holds that instead of breaking free from mind-body dualisms, we are becoming more Cartesian. Thanks to all sorts of medical engineering, including organ transplants, skin grafts, and pacemakers: "we now treat the body as an assemblage of replaceable parts, a veritable machine, exactly what Descartes said it was" (p. 13). The current definition of brain death is Cartesian through and through: if nothing happens in the mind, then personhood ends, and the corpse is ready to be surgically disassembled. Social scientists might believe that Descartes is dead and the sensuous body restored, but even in popular body concepts, Cartesian dualism lives on.

If so much effort is necessary to overcome Descartes, the fruits of this endeavor must be truly tempting. What does a post-Cartesian future hold, and why should the body *improper* be so desirable? Some qualities of the body improper might be inferred by inverting the body proper, but would this mean that this utopian body would not be covered by skin, not bear rights, not communicate, not collect experiences? Would it have diseases that could never be classified, act irrationally, and never think of economic benefits? The editors make a few explicit statements about what the improper body holds. Quoting Michael Taussig, they suggest that post-Cartesianism allows us to rediscover "nonexploitative solidarities" (p. 244), where life takes place on a "re-enchanted empirical field for a more sensuous scholarship" (p. 247). They promise an "indeterminate site of natural-cultural processes that is full of possibilities and impossible to delimit. Not only is the body not singular, it is not very proper either" (p. 10). Improper bodies mingling indiscriminately on a site where nature merges with culture, "a lively carnality suffused with words, images, senses, desires, and powers" (p. 15)—it all sounds like a great party. Who would have thought that life could be so much fun once Descartes is thrown out? (And who ever had the crazy idea of inviting him in?)

If all dichotomies are bad, perhaps not everything that belongs to the body proper must be rejected. Maybe some of its skin-bounded and rights-bearing qualities are achievements, after all. I would hold that Cartesian dualism is precisely one of the foundations of the politics of freedom and equality that Lock and Farquhar propose. Descartes says that the mind is independent of the physical body that contains it. Modern politics hold that people's opinions are to be kept separate from bodily attributes such as gender, skin color, or beauty, that the

minds of those who take part in the political sphere have to be split from their bodies to ensure that bodily difference is not turned into political difference.

Despite Lock and Farquhar's claims, I cannot see how the body proper would tend to naturalize and legitimate inequality. Rather, the opposite seems true. The notion of the fluid, protean, improper body that Lock and Farquhar set up as a political utopia is often part of hierarchical and oppressive regimes. Let me give two examples: the first relates to Hindu India, the second to Aristotle's political philosophy.

Orthodox Brahminic thought rejects any notion of a body proper. High-caste Brahmins see bodies of different degrees of purity and merit. Any action and transaction in daily life threatens to pollute: any work that brings one into contact with impure substances makes the whole person impure. "Untouchables" are untouchable because they inherit the low bodily substances of their ancestors and because they carry out tasks that no one from a higher caste would deem proper. As the anthropologist Jonathan Parry (1989) points out, the Brahminic belief that bodies are unstable and porous is part of a political ideology that legitimates rank through bodily differences: "The impact of this menacing vision can surely only be a message of strict obedience to the rigid order of caste . . . the ideology of fluid substances implies . . . that the disintegration of the self results from stepping off the tried and tested tracks of the established pattern of caste interaction" (pp. 513–14). One of the nice things about the Cartesian mind-body split is that it makes such hierarchical orders appear illegitimate.

Descartes was at the forefront of thinkers who broke the canonical position of Aristotelian philosophy. Aristotle's *Politics* is based on another kind of body improper. He conceives the polis as a sphere of freedom and equality: politics is defined as the voluntary coming together of free men to pursue the higher good. This sphere of freedom is founded on the household (*oikos*), a sphere of necessity. The household ensures physical reproduction: eating and having children. For Aristotle, material necessity implies hierarchy: men must rule women, parents rule children, masters rule slaves. In the opening of *The Politics*, Aristotle points out that the rule of households and the rule of the polis follow entirely different principles. In the sphere of the household, bodies are inherently different, and therefore its governance is also based on difference. Inside the polis, however, no bodily difference is admitted. The necessary inequality of the *oikos* was the basis for the voluntary equality of the polis.

Aristotle claims that human beings are born into the necessities of the household and that only a few can enter the polis. Political modernity, in turn, holds that all human beings are born right into the polis, free and equal. That is why Pierre Manent (2006), a political philosopher, says that modern politics are radically "disembodied." For us moderns, politics should aim at freedom and equality for all: Aristotelian and Brahminic notions of bodily difference repel us. Our politics exclude organic materialism; bodily differences are not allowed to make a difference. This belief is also behind many of our bioethical controversies. Do

stem cells have human rights? Do embryos have feelings and thoughts? Should people with mental diseases be free, equal, and allowed to vote? Where orthodox Brahmins and Aristotelian politicians would answer these questions with a resounding “no,” modern politics wants to stretch the sphere of politics as wide as possible. Equality in the political sphere cannot and must not be based on physical attributes. For moderns, only the exclusion of the material body from the sphere of politics secures the widest possible freedom for all.

Descartes did not only help establish the natural sciences, but also the freedom of thought in philosophy, the humanities, and ultimately the social sciences. With his insistence on inner calm instead of outer change, he was evidently not a political revolutionary. However, his philosophical ideas were important for the emergence of modern politics of freedom and equality. In this way, the critical scholarship presented in *Beyond the Body Proper* also belongs to a Cartesian world.

Descartes’s skull is safely locked away in the Museum of Mankind. There is no need to still go hunting for his head.

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